

How the New York Times and Academia Kept the Biggest Secret of the Pentagon Papers

[This was published at morrissey.substack.com on April 4, 2024, OpEdNews.com on [April 18, 2024](#) and (due to a glitch) also on [April 20, 2024](#) and [April 23, 2024](#).]

Most readers of the *New York Times*, not only the true believers but even those who now see it as a [CIA mouthpiece](#), would probably agree that it was a different paper in 1971 when they published the [Pentagon Papers](#) (henceforth "PP NYT"), that "epic document," according to their own [self-accolade](#), that exposed "the secrets and lies of the Vietnam War."

The biggest secret, however, and what I call "[The Second Biggest Lie](#)" (cf. *Looking for the Enemy*, Ch. 2) -- after the Warren Report -- of that era is that President Johnson continued Kennedy's Vietnam policy, when in fact he reversed it. There should never have been any controversy about this, but thanks to the NYT and a slew of academic historians who, for the first thirty years, accepted this lie, and then, for the next thirty years, engaged in a furious but spurious debate over facts that were either known (that there was a withdrawal policy under Kennedy and that Johnson reversed it) or unknowable (what JFK's "secret intentions" were and what he would have done if he had not been assassinated), instead of facing the plain facts and their implications, as Franz Schurmann, Peter Dale Scott and Reginald Zelnick did in a perspicacious little book that appeared five years before the *Pentagon Papers*:

...precisely at a moment when neutralist sentiment was increasing in Saigon and elsewhere, the shift from a moderate to a militant government in Saigon was accompanied by a shift in Washington's declared policy from limited to unlimited support for the Vietnam war. It is important to recall, in this regard, the stated intention of the Kennedy administration, as announced by McNamara and Taylor from the White House on October 2, 1963, which was to withdraw most U.S. forces from South Vietnam by the end of 1965. The first public indication of a change in the U.S. intentions came in a letter from President Johnson to [Duong Van Minh](#) at New Year's, 1964, which promised "the fullest measure of support...in achieving victory." *The New York Times* commented, "By implication, the message *erased the previous date for withdrawing the bulk of United States forces from Vietnam by the end of 1965*" (NYT, January 2, 1964, p. 7).

... In retrospect, it is hard to deny that, shortly before the [\[January 1964\]](#) coup, the United States had made the crucial decision to *reverse the policy, announced during the last days of President Kennedy's administration, of gradually withdrawing U.S. troops from South Vietnam*. Was it all a coincidence that a change in leadership in Washington was followed by a change in policy, and a change in policy by a corresponding change in Saigon's government? Administration officials have never yet seen fit to defend publicly this important *reversal of policy*; thus they have not identified the threat that brought it about. Was it a radical increase in the strength of the opposing forces? As far as we know, none has ever been alleged. Or was it a radical decline in Saigon's will to resist, with a corresponding disposition toward the political proposals of de Gaulle and the [NLF](#) [and U Thant of the UN, for a neutral or coalition government in South Vietnam]?

One conclusion can be asserted unequivocally: The United States increased its commitment to a prolongation of the Vietnam war at a time when the drift of the Saigon junta and of public opinion was in the direction of negotiations for a neutralized Vietnam. [*The Politics of Escalation in Vietnam*, 1966, out of print but still accessible at archive.org. Pp. 32-34. My emphasis.]

There never should have been a question whether there was a withdrawal policy or whether it was reversed. The important question, then and now (re Ukraine, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, etc.) is why the US feels compelled to wage war everywhere on behalf of "the free world." Schurmann et al. answer this with regard to Vietnam in the words of Robert McNamara:

A more explicit official indication of *reversal of policy* came in the testimony of Secretary McNamara before the Armed Services Committee, on January 27, three days before the [\[January 1964\]](#) coup:

The survival of an independent government in South Vietnam is so important to the security of Southeast Asia and to the free world that I can conceive of no alternative other than to take all necessary measures within our capability to prevent a Communist victory. (M. Raskin and B. Fall, *The Vietnam Reader*, New York, 1965, p. 394). [P. 33. My emphasis.]

Substitute "South Vietnam," "Southeast Asia" and "Communist" with terms appropriate to other US wars and you have the answer that applies to all of them: in a word, US imperialism, exceptionalism, neoconservatism – take your pick.

All we need to know about JFK's withdrawal policy and LBJ's reversal of it is in the paragraphs cited above. Why, then, has there been so much fuss about it?

To answer that question we can start with the main antagonist on one side of this spurious debate, Noam Chomsky, and as it happens, with his very first political essay, "[The Responsibility of Intellectuals](#)" (1967). In a footnote to illustrate the kind of research a citizen must undertake "to confront government pronouncements with fact," Chomsky cites this same book by Schurmann et al. to make a point that he would return to many times in later work. He calls it "Orwell's problem" (cf. *Knowledge of Language: It's Nature, Origin, and Use*, 1986; *Manufacturing Consent*, 1988): Why do we know so little when there is so much information available?

"Orwell's problem" is our problem, Chomsky is saying, if we want to know the truth amidst the barrage of government and media propaganda, reinforced by an educational system that conditions us to accept what respected authorities say as true.

How many people knew, in 1966, what Schurmann et al. (and Chomsky?) knew – that LBJ reversed JFK's withdrawal policy? Yes, it was reported in the NYT (see quote). But what political impact did this "news" have? That is the crucial question, as Chomsky, of all people, has always been fully aware.

Thus I was puzzled by his reaction to what I thought was obvious – that JFK's withdrawal plan was based on the *assumption* (rather than the *condition*, as Chomsky insists) of military success. What I was saying, Chomsky wrote in a letter to me on Jan. 7, 1993 (my letters and summaries of his are [here](#)),

is uncontroversially true, and completely – totally – without interest. Furthermore, it has been known to be true, and uninteresting, for almost 30 years. The basic content of the withdrawal plans was made public at once, in October 1963.

He was referring to the same [White House Statement](#) of Oct. 2, 1963 that Schurmann et al. referred to. I had pointed out to him (cf. *Looking for the Enemy*, Addendum 6, [June 18](#),

[1992](#)), with examples taken at random, how respected historians like J. M. Roberts, Paul Kennedy, Nevins and Commager, and Stanley Karnow had perpetuated the myth of continuity between the Kennedy and Johnson Vietnam policies over these three decades, thanks to which

the general public has not even been aware that there was a withdrawal policy, much less that Johnson reversed it – despite the clear account in PP Gravel. If the Stone film [\[JFK\]](#) informed people of this much, it has performed a public service.

For Chomsky, "Orwell's problem" was not at work here because the historians I had cited were correct, and the Stone film was wrong to imply otherwise. The Establishment historians had described continuity because there *was* continuity.

The notion of continuity was in fact *doctrine* imposed immediately after the assassination, expressly ordered by the Johnson administration and faithfully carried out by the government scribes ([Leslie Gelb](#) et al.) who wrote the historical summaries in the four-volume edition published by [Beacon Press](#) in October 1971 (henceforth PP Gravel) and the NYT reporters who wrote the one-volume abridged (and partially rewritten) version published in the newspaper and as a Bantam paperback in July 1971 (PP NYT).

PP Gravel says:

The consequences [of Kennedy's assassination] were to set an institutional freeze on the direction and momentum of U.S. Vietnam policy. Universally operative was a desire to avoid change of any kind during the critical interregnum period of the new Johnson Administration. Both the President and the governmental establishment consciously strove for continuity, with respect to Vietnam no less than in other areas. In Vietnam this continuity meant that the phase-out concept, the CPSVN [Comprehensive Plan for South Vietnam] withdrawal plan, and the MAP [Military Assistance Program] programs probably survived beyond the point they might have otherwise.

The immediate Johnson stamp on the Kennedy policy came on 26 November. At a NSC [National Security Council] meeting convened to consider the results of the 20 November Honolulu Conference, the President "reaffirmed that U.S. objectives with respect to withdrawal of U.S. military personnel remain as stated in the White House statement of October 2, 1963." [Pp. 190-191.]

PP NYT mentions the assassination only in passing and emphasizing not the continuity of the withdrawal plan but "[p]articularly in the sphere of covert operations against North Vietnam...a smooth transition in the decision-making process." [P. 189.]

PP NYT is clearly exercised to disguise the significance and even the existence of the withdrawal plan, which constitutes an entire chapter of PP Gravel, much less acknowledge Johnson's reversal of it. The "Phased Withdrawal of U.S. Forces in Vietnam, 1962-1964," Ch. 3 of Vol. 2 of PP Gravel, is omitted in the PP NYT table of contents and in the sub-headings within the chapters. The term "phased withdrawal" occurs only once in PP NYT (p. 25) and refers not to the Kennedy plan but to its earliest stage under Eisenhower in the spring of 1960 when there were less than a thousand US personnel in Vietnam, which increased to more than 16,000 in 1963 (see [here](#)).

PP NYT must be added, then, to the list of Establishment historians who have accepted the myth of continuity. Ten years after I wrote to Chomsky (cf. *Looking for the Enemy*, Addendum 6, [June 18, 1992](#) and [Aug. 3, 1992](#); also *Looking for the Enemy*, Ch. 2.3) [James Galbraith](#) made the same point in a *Boston Review* [article](#), but I seem to be the only person who has noticed this in PP NYT. I think it's important because, again with reference to

"Orwell's problem," PP NYT was intended for the mass market and was much more likely to be read, even cursorily, than the four-volume PP Gravel (five including the volume of essays edited by Noam Chomsky and Howard Zinn).

Hedrick Smith, the reporter who wrote the two chapters of PP NYT covering the time of the Kennedy-Johnson transition ("The Kennedy Years" and "The Overthrow of Ngo Dinh Diem"), writes at the end of Ch. 3 that the "Pentagon account"

presents the picture of an unbroken chain of decision-making from the final months of the Kennedy Administration into the early months of the Johnson Administration, whether in terms of the political view of the American stakes in Vietnam, the advisory buildup or the hidden growth of covert warfare against North Vietnam.

This wording ("unbroken chain of decision-making") is not found in PP Gravel, which has a more qualified description of the transition:

The only hint that something might be different from on-going plans came in a Secretary of Defense memo for the President three days prior to this NSC National Security Council meeting [on Nov. 26, 1963]. In that memo, Mr. McNamara said [i.e. on Nov. 23, one day after the assassination] that the new South Vietnamese government was confronted by serious financial problems, and that the U.S. must be prepared to raise planned MAP levels.

In early December, the President began to have, if not second thoughts, at least a sense of uneasiness about Vietnam. In discussions with his advisors, he set in motion what he hoped would be a major policy review, fully staffed in depth, by Administration principals. The President wanted "a fresh new look taken" at the whole problem. In preparation for such a basic reappraisal, an interdepartmental meeting of second-echelon principals accordingly convened on 3 December and laid out a broad outline of basic topics to be addressed and staff papers to be developed by various departments and agencies. This attempt at a systematic and comprehensive re-examination, however, did not culminate in a fundamental national reassessment.

That fundamental reassessment did occur, of course, and we can rely on Noam Chomsky's own prodigious scholarship to make this clear.

The first report prepared for LBJ (November 23) opened with this "Summary Assessment": "The outlook is hopeful. There is better assurance than under Diem that the war can be won. We are pulling out 1,000 American troops by the end of 1963." Apart from a serious budgetary deficit, the "main concern is whether the generals can hold together until victory has been achieved." The next day, however, CIA Director John McCone informed the President that the CIA now regarded the situation as "somewhat more serious" than had been thought, with "a continuing increase in Viet Cong activity since the first of November" (the coup). Subsequent reports only deepened the gloom. [*Rethinking Camelot*, 1993, p. 91.]

Re "Orwell's problem" (which is not trivial), the footnote to this paragraph refers to no less than 5 places in FRUSV IV (*Foreign Relations of the United States, Vietnam 1961-1963*) and FRUSV-64 I (*Foreign Relations of the United States, Vietnam, 1964-1968*) but without hyperlinks, even in the 2015 Kindle edition. Talk about "Orwell's problem"! Links would save readers (literally) hours of tedious searching.

The *Pentagon Papers* themselves are another case in point. The 2011 edition is now accessible on the National Archives [website](#) but it is organized differently than PP Gravel and consists only of PDFs, which are difficult to search, and the pagination is confusing

(sometimes Arabic numerals, sometimes Roman numerals, sometimes letters). The Mt. Holyoke PP Gravel archive is preserved [here](#), which is more easily searchable but does not include page numbers, so I will refer here to PP Gravel by page number since all five volumes are (fortunately) freely available at archive.org (also as PDFs).

About halfway through our almost six-year correspondence (1989-1995) Chomsky told me (July 1, 1992) that I had helped him "clarify the issues" to himself, which he hoped would show up in what he was writing – which turned out to be *Rethinking Camelot* (1993). Clarity for him was perplexing for me, though, because I could never get him to budge from his contention that Kennedy did not have a "withdrawal" policy but a "withdrawal after victory" policy. We went round and round about this, and looking back on it, I can see the adumbration of this dispute even in the earliest reporting.

The front page of the Pacific *Stars and Stripes* of Oct. 4, 1963 (I have a photocopy) had this banner headline: "U.S. TROOPS SEEN OUT OF VIET BY '65." The opening sentence was:

The White House said Wednesday night [Oct. 2] after hearing a report from a two-man inspection team that the U.S. military effort in the Republic of Vietnam should be completed by the end of 1965.

The NYT put the story on the [front page](#) on Oct. 3 (with the [full text](#) of the Statement on p. 4). The column headline was "VIETNAM VICTORY BY THE END OF '65 ENVISAGED BY U.S." The sub-head was "Officials Say War May Be Won if Political Crisis Does Not Hamstring Effort," and the "if" is reinforced in the opening sentence:

The United States said tonight [Oct. 2] that the war in South Vietnam might be won by the end of 1965 if the political crisis there did not "significantly" affect the military effort.

Headlines and first sentences, as every journalism student knows, are the most important elements of a news story, and in view of the argument that Chomsky was at such pains to make 30 years later, first with me and then in the book, the difference here is worth examining.

There is no conditionality in the *Stars and Stripes* version. In the NYT version, "envisaged" connotes a less concrete image than "seen" (you "see" an object in front of you, you don't "envisage" it), and the explicit condition ("if") is mentioned twice, once in the sub-head and again in the opening sentence (what grammarians call an "unreal" or "contrary-to-fact" condition). "Should" in the *Stars and Stripes* expresses probability (more than 50%). "May" in the NYT version expresses possibility (50%), and "might" expresses improbability (less than 50%).

If I had noticed this in 1992-93 when I was arguing with the most famous linguist in the world about the difference between a *condition* and an *assumption*, I would have pointed it out. But I'm sure his reaction would have been that the NYT's report was more accurate, because he was so convinced that the withdrawal plan was not based on the *assumption* of continuing military success but explicitly *conditional* on it.

The common-sense interpretation of the [McNamara-Taylor Report](#), which was the basis of the [White House Statement](#) on the same day (Oct. 2) and of both JFK's [NSAM 263](#) and LBJ's [NSAM 273](#), is that continuing military success was an assumption, not a condition.

This is not rocket science. If I say, "Barbara is doing well in school and should graduate next year," I do not mean, "Barbara is doing well in school, but only if she continues to do well will she graduate next year..

Likewise, if I say, "The military campaign has made great progress and continues to progress ([I.A.1](#)) [and] it should be possible to withdraw the bulk of U.S. personnel by that time [the end of 1965] ([I.B.2](#))," I do not mean, "The military campaign is going well but only if it continues to go well will there be any withdrawal of troops."

Chomsky never budged in his position that these documents (and others) make it absolutely clear that a withdrawal would only take place on the "explicit condition of victory," so that "withdrawal policy" can only be understood as a "withdrawal after victory" policy (cf. *Rethinking Camelot*, 1993 and 2015, *passim*).

By the time I finally got him to accept what he called my "thesis," which he then dismissed as "known to be true, and uninteresting, for almost 30 years" (Jan. 7, 1993), I had read Newman's *JFK and Vietnam* and I realized that Chomsky had not been arguing with me all this time so much as with Newman and other JFK "hagiographers" who were in fact arguing that Kennedy had decided to withdraw not just on the assumption, and not on the condition, of victory, but *regardless* of victory ("victory" meaning being able to turn the war over to the South Vietnamese).

This was a whole different ball game. It put the debate fully on the level of pure speculation about what Kennedy was "really thinking" and what he would have done if he had lived. It started with John Newman's *JFK and Vietnam*, which appeared in early 1992 shortly after the release of Oliver Stone's *JFK*, for which Newman had been a consultant.

In January 1992, before Newman's book was in the bookstores, Alexander Cockburn wrote in *The Nation*, Jan. 6/13 ("J.F.K. and JFK"):

Newman's *JFK and Vietnam* first came into the offices of Sheridan Square Press, [Ellen] Ray and [Bill] Schaap's publishing house, whence it was passed on to Stone, who assisted in its dispatch to Warner Books (part of the conglomerate backing *JFK*), which is publishing the book in February. [*The Nation*, Jan. 6/13, "F.F.K. and JFK."]

So Cockburn had an advance copy of the book, which he proceeded to savage. This would not be noteworthy except for the underlying relationships of the people involved. Bill Schaap and Ellen Ray, the publishers of Garrison's *On the Trail of the Assassins*, were also the publishers of [Covert Action Quarterly](#) (formerly *Covert Action Information Bulletin*, now [Covert Action Magazine](#)) and [Lies of Our Times](#) (now defunct), to which Chomsky was a frequent contributor. Chomsky told me on May 15, 1989 that CAIB was "Quite a good rag. I write for it a lot." This was puzzling since I could find only two articles by him in all the back issues, one of which (No. 32, summer 1989) was simply an abbreviated version of the other (No. 26, summer 1986) both identically titled "Libya in US Demonology."

Obviously Schaap and Ray differed sharply with Chomsky, however, and with Cockburn, over the Kennedy assassination issue. Cockburn says of the film:

Ray...has long felt that history did a U-turn for the worse when conspiracy laid J.F.K. low. Why the publishers of *Covert Action Information Bulletin* and *Lies of Our Times* should take this position I'm not sure, unless we take a biographical approach and argue that maybe it all goes back to Ellen's Catholic girlhood in Massachusetts, with an icon of J.F.K. on the wall.

Since I was already corresponding with Chomsky at the time, I asked him if he knew Cockburn. He replied that he and Cockburn were "in very regular contact, and have a good deal of exchange as well" (March 3, 1992). In May I published my own [review](#) of the Stone film ("X, Y and JFK," [The Third Decade May 1992, 8.4, 14-17](#)), and sent Chomsky a copy. He answered (May 21, 1992) that Cockburn's review was, "so far,"

the only one in print that does justice to the factual record. Perhaps I should abstain from comment on this, since I did a lot of the background research for it (though what he wrote is his way of using it).

The reader of Cockburn's review, then, should not be surprised to recognize the same arguments reappearing, first in Chomsky's article in *Z* magazine in September 1992, "[Vain Hopes, False Dreams](#)," and later in *Rethinking Camelot*.

It seems the knives were out and waiting for the "withdrawal thesis," as Chomsky and others have continued to call it, to hit the movie theaters and the bookstores, the "thesis" being not the plan and policy described in PP Gravel but JFK's putative intention to withdraw no matter what.

Peter Dale Scott, who as one of the authors of *The Politics of Escalation* had already said all that needed to be said in 1966, laid the seed for the debate that broke out twenty years later in his 1972 essay in volume 5 of PP Gravel, "Vietnamization and the Drama of the Pentagon Papers" (see also [here](#)). In this essay he argues that Johnson's [NSAM 273](#), which was partially reproduced in PP Gravel and PP NYT but not declassified until [June 8, 1976](#), signed four days after the assassination, already shows a reversal of JFK's withdrawal policy.

John Newman confirms Scott's analysis in *JFK and Vietnam*, and adds to it his contention that the [draft of NSAM 273](#) written by McGeorge Bundy for Kennedy the day before the assassination, shows the difference even more clearly. The McBundy draft, curiously enough, was declassified on Jan. 21, 1991, just in time for the Stone movie and Newman's book.

Chomsky has argued with undiminished vigor against the "withdrawal thesis," which by now has been fully conflated with what should be called the "withdrawal regardless of victory thesis" advocated by Scott and Newman, and more recently Galbraith (see [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)). He wavers only slightly in the preface to the 2015 edition of *Rethinking Camelot* in saying that recently released material "makes it even more clear that the tentative withdrawal initiative was primarily McNamara's" and crediting Marc Selverstone (cf. *The Kennedy Withdrawal*, 2022) with this "plausible" conclusion, no doubt because:

Selverstone also gently refutes claims about Kennedy's hidden intentions – so deeply hidden that there isn't a particle of evidence for them, though there is plenty of evidence refuting them. But Camelot wish-fulfillment is likely to be as resistant to fact and logic as the rather similar Reagan worship at the other extreme of the political spectrum.

I had been calling attention to what I called the "[false debate](#)" (cf. *The Transparent Conspiracy*, "Chomsky and Newman – the False Debate") between Newman and Chomsky since 1994, when I sent an "[Open Letter to John Newman](#)," (cf. *Looking for the Enemy*, Addendum 2) to which he never replied, but see Michael Parenti's [reply](#) and [my reply](#) to Parenti (*Looking for the Enemy*, Addenda 3 and 4). I sent copies of these letters to Chomsky, who seemed particularly irritated by my letter to Newman, accusing me (Feb. 9,

1995) of "misquoting" from *Rethinking Camelot* "with your usual consistency, which also extends to your treatment of the historical and documentary record."

The false debate has continued until today (I think Selverstone is the latest installment) about what Kennedy was "really thinking" and what he would have done if he had lived. All of this sleuthing and conjecture, fed by periodic releases of classified material to grow the already gargantuan maze of government documents, plays right into the hands of the CIA, which thrives on "Deception, Intrigue, and the Struggle for Power," as Newman subtitled his book. Former CIA director William Colby gushed his approval on the jacket:

A brilliant, meticulously researched and fascinating account of the decision-making which led to America's long agony in Vietnam. Mr. Newman has added to our history – and hopefully to our modesty – as we approach the decisions of the future.

Quite an endorsement from a former head of the agency that Kennedy wanted to "splinter...in a thousand pieces and scatter...to the winds" (according to the [NYT](#), April 25, 1966, p. 20) and that, according to many, murdered him (e.g., Jim Garrison, *On the Trail of the Assassins*, 1988; James Douglass, *JFK and the Unspeakable*, 2008; Mark Lane, *Last Word*, 2011; David Talbot, *The Devil's Chessboard*, 2016).

The withdrawal plan was never a "thesis" but a *fact* and a *policy*, clearly described in PP Gravel, that began under Kennedy and ended, at the very latest (formally), on March 27, 1964:

Thus ended de jure the policy of phase out and withdrawal and all the plans and programs oriented to it. Shortly, they would be canceled out de facto. [Vol. 2, Ch. 3, p. 198.]

PP NYT seems to have been quite aware of the controversy that would erupt about the withdrawal policy. Hedrick Smith writes on p. 114 (see [here](#) for whole page):

Despite the tens of thousands of words in the Pentagon account of the Kennedy Administration, backed by scores of documents, the study does not provide a conclusive answer to the most vigorously debated question about President Kennedy's Vietnam policy since his death in November, 1963: If President Kennedy had lived until 1965, would he have felt compelled by events, as President Johnson was, to undertake full-scale land war in South Vietnam and an air war against the North? [P. 114.]

"Most vigorously debated question"? Really? Even then? Maybe I missed it, but I don't know of any debate at all about this, much less a "vigorous" one, until Stone's *JFK* brought it into the movie theaters.

What Smith writes here seems fair enough, but the paragraphs that follow demand scrutiny. (There is nothing like them in PP Gravel.) It may be just bad writing, but I doubt it.

First Smith says that in 1961 Kennedy was "distracted" and "restrained" by other crises (Berlin, Cuba, Laos) in a way that Johnson later was not, and that Diem did not push Kennedy "so aggressively for American escalation" as Gen. Khanh did Johnson.

The implication is that Kennedy, in Johnson's place, would also have escalated. It is cleverly hidden, but becomes clear considering the word "moreover" in the next sentence.

The Pentagon account, *moreover*, presents the picture of *an unbroken chain of decision-making* from the final months of the Kennedy Administration into the early months of the Johnson Administration, whether in terms of the political view of the

American stakes in Vietnam, the advisory buildup or the hidden growth of covert warfare against North Vietnam. [My emphasis.]

"Moreover" makes no sense at all unless it is interpreted as "in addition to what I have just implied, that JFK would have acted just like LBJ."

In the next paragraph Smith has a problem. He wants to quote from PP Gravel (that is, from the original document), Vol. 2, p. 68:

No reliable inference can be drawn *from this* about how Kennedy would have behaved in 1965 and beyond had he lived. [My italics.]

The problem is that In PP Gravel "from this" refers to the preceding discussion, which is only about the situation in 1961. If Smith leaves these two words in, it would sound nonsensical and self-contradictory, as if he were to say: "JFK would have acted just like LBJ. No reliable inference can be drawn from this." So he just leaves those two words out. Now the reader is free to understand what Smith wants him to understand, namely: "JFK probably would have acted just like LBJ, *although* no *absolutely* reliable inference can be drawn."

Maybe just bad writing, as I say, which is always hard to disentangle, but my analysis makes sense because we know what the author wants to say. He says it clearly in the preceding paragraph. It is not so much that the "Pentagon account presents the picture of an unbroken chain of decision-making" (which it does not), but that Hedrick Smith wants to present such a picture.

Noam Chomsky was not the only astute reader of *The Politics of Escalation in Vietnam* in 1966. It was also read by Vincent Salandria, a Philadelphia lawyer who was the first person, as far as I know, to publish a critique of the *Warren Report* (on [Nov. 2, 1964](#); cf. also John Kelin's *In Praise of Future Generations*, 2007). After the killing of [Martin Luther King](#) in April and three days after the killing of [Robert Kennedy](#), Salandria gave a clear and specific answer to the question that Schurmann et al. had posed two years earlier:

We feel that the shooting of President Kennedy was a foreign policy killing done at the behest of military circles in the United States and executed by operatives under the control and in the employ of the Central Intelligence Agency.

What changed following the assassination of President Kennedy was our foreign policy and our form of government. Three weeks after the assassination the junta leaders in Saigon were told that the United States was prepared to help as long as aid was needed. We had made the critical decision to reverse the policy announced at the end of the Kennedy administration to withdraw U.S. troops from Vietnam. In Latin America, the Johnson government immediately signaled the end of Kennedyism by supporting the military regimes in the Dominican Republic and Brazil. The Gulf of Tonkin incident was generated by the military as a monumental fraud—perpetrated on an all-too-unskeptical Congress—to provide [an] excuse for further escalation in Vietnam. So President Kennedy's courageous efforts to end the Cold War were shot down with him, and the Cold War then grew in intensity and the democratic processes in the United States eroded in favor of more power to the military. [[Speech](#) at an antiwar rally in Central Park, NYC, June 9, 1968.]

By "we" Salandria no doubt included Jim Garrison, with whom he had been working since 1964 and whose first book *A Heritage of Stone* (1970) he edited and for which he wrote the final section "[A Model of Explanation](#)." A longer version of that essay published in [1971](#) mentions Schurmann et al. explicitly.

The withdrawal "issue" has been phony from the beginning. It doesn't matter at all exactly when Kennedy made the decision or exactly when Johnson reversed it, what either of them was "really thinking" when they made the decisions, what Kennedy would have done if he had not been murdered, or whether the policy was changed (reversed) because the situation changed – as Chomsky tells us (see quote above), from "hopeful" to "gloomy" from one day to the next (Nov. 24, 1963) or as Schurmann et al. tell us (see quote above), by Jan. 2, 1964, or as PP Gravel tells us, de jure by March 27, 1964.

We are left with three stark facts: 1) JFK's plan to withdraw, 2) JFK's murder and 3) LBJ's reversal of the plan. "Was it all a coincidence," as Schurmann et al. asked in 1966, "that a change in leadership in Washington was followed by a change in policy?" (see quote above).

As I wrote to Chomsky on [March 17, 1992](#), still hoping that we could agree at least on this much;

Once these facts are stated plainly – which is never done (except in the dissident assassination literature) – it is obvious why the historical engineers have struggled so long and hard to avoid doing so. The question then becomes inescapable: Is there a causal relationship between 1-3? Since the question is not permissible, 1 and 3 must be suppressed by all possible means.

All of the discussion about the withdrawal plan, especially since 1991, has served to create a bubble of confusion and distraction – a "[false mystery](#)," as Vince Salandria called the JFK murder case as a whole – around the question that should have been clear and obvious from the beginning: Was Kennedy killed by the warmongers? If we had been able (despite "Orwell's problem") to listen to Salandria, we would have heard that question and the answer to it loud and clear more than 50 years ago.